

The History of Rock Music: 1989-1994

Raves, grunge, post-rock

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Post-ambient Music

(These are excerpts from my book ["A History of Rock and Dance Music"](#))

Electronic Ambience, 1989-93

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New studio techniques and new electronic and digital instruments allowed rock music and avantgarde music to develop new kinds of composition and performance. Ambient and cosmic music, in particular, reached an artistic peak. Noise was employed in a less irreverent and more calculated manner. Electronic sounds became less alien and more humane. Sound effects became the center of mass, not the centrifugal force. Overall, the emphasis shifted from melody/rhythm to "sound" and "ambience". And, in a way, this was the terminal point of a movement begun at the outset of the 20th century to emancipate music from the dogmas of classical music.

French combo [Lightwave](#) (20) was still composing electronic tonal poems in the spirit of the German "cosmic couriers" of the 1970s, but they added intrepid new ideas. Serge Leroy and Christoph Harbonnier harked back to Klaus Schulze's early works on **Nachtmusik** (1990), but enhanced that cliché with techniques borrowed from avantgarde music. **Tycho Brahe** (1993), that added Paul Haslinger (ex-Tangerine Dream) and violinist Jacques Deregnaucourt to the line-up, offered elegant, dramatic and highly dynamic chamber-electronic music of a kind that had never been heard before. Electronic music had matured into something both more conventional (like a traditional instrument) and more alien (like a supernatural harmony). **Mundus Subterraneus** (1995) reached new psychological depths, while furthering their soundpainting both at the microscopic and at the macroscopic levels. A spiderweb of metabolizing structures, an organic blend of timbres, drones and dissonances, it blurred the line between rationality and chaos, showing one as being the sense of the other. The spirit of Lightwave's music recalled the allegorical, encyclopedic minutiae of medieval treatises, an elaborate clockwork of

impossible mirages and erudite quotations. Ultimately, it was a journey back to the roots of the human adventure.

In Germany, Uwe Schmidt's multi-faceted saga began with [Lassigue Bendthaus](#) and unfocused electronic soundscapes such as the ones on **Render** (1994). His ambient/atmospheric project [Atom Heart](#) was more successful, particularly with **Morphogenetics Fields** (1994). [N+'s Built](#) (1996), which was virtually a tribute to cosmic music, and the numerous collaborations between Bill Laswell and Pete Namlook completed his training in the field of lengthy, static electronic poems. But his activity ranged from Latin music, explored by [Senor Coconut Y Su Conjunto](#), for example on **El Gran Baile** (1997), to the digital ambient/industrial jazz-rock of [Flanger](#), a collaboration with percussionist Bernd Friedman, on **Templates** (1999). His partnership with Japanese visionary Tetsu Inoue was particularly relevant. The third [Datacide](#) (1) album, **Flowerhead** (1994), toyed with a noise-based form of ambient music that sounded like organic matter slowly developing into an embryo. The duo recorded ambient works under several names, notably Masters Of Psychedelic Ambiance's **MU** (1995) and Second Nature's **Second Nature** (1995).

[Tetsu Inoue](#), Uwe Schmidt's partner in Datacide, was even more delicate on **Ambiant Otaku** (1994).

In Belgium, [Vidna Obmana](#) (2), Dirk Serries' project, practiced electronic soundpainting on the ambient trilogy begun with **Passage In Beauty** (1991), but **Echoing Delight** (1993) shifted the emphasis towards spiritual and tribal evocations. This is the genre in which Serries gave his most original and poignant works, first **Spiritual Bonding** (1994), a collaboration with Steve Roach and Robert Rich, and then **Crossing The Trail** (1998).

In Holland, [Ron Boots](#)'s **Different Stories and Twisted Tales** (1993) straddled the border between sequencer and ambient music. In Portugal [Nuno Canavarro](#) produced one of the most atmospheric works of early ambient music, **Plux Quba** (1988).

San Francisco's [Kim Cascone](#) (1) mined the border between ambient music and musique concrete both on [Heavenly Music Corporation](#)'s **In A Garden Of Eden** (1993) and on [PGR](#)'s **The Morning Book of Serpents** (1995).

[A Produce](#) (2), Barry Craig's project, also from California, crafted **Reflect Like A Mirror** (1993), an impeccable follow-up to Brian Eno's and Harold Budd's ambient classics, as well as the majestic albeit brainy world-music of **Land Of A Thousand Trances** (1994).

Happy The Man's keyboardist [Kit Watkins](#) (1) composed the austere **Thought Tones** (1992) and especially **Circle** (1993), a suite for electronic sounds and natural sounds.

In Canada, [Delerium](#) (3), an offshoot of Front Line Assembly, crossed over into gothic, dance and pop music with meticulously and lushly arranged albums such as **Stone Tower** (1990), **Spiritual Archives** (1991) and **Spheres** (1994). Their associates [Will](#) (1) composed the pagan mass **Pearl Of Great Price** (1991) in a similar vein.

Arizona-based [Life Garden](#) (1) sounded like the electronic version of Popol Vuh on **Caught Between The Tapestry Of Silence And Beauty** (1991).

The "organic sound sculpting" of [Voice Of Eye](#) (2), the Texas-based duo of Bonnie McNaim and Jim Wilson, was inspired, at different levels, by Steve Roach, Harold Budd, and Karlheinz Stockhausen. **Mariner Sonique** (1993), the seven **Vespers** (1994), imbued with medieval spirituality and zen transcendence, and the six movements of **Transmigration** (1996) co-founded the religious version of electronic world-music with Life Garden.

The most challenging and political form of ambient music was perhaps the one invented in New York by [Terre Thaemlitz](#), for example on **Soil** (1995).

[Liquid Mind](#) (2), the project of Los Angeles-based composer Chuck Wild, sculpted the ecstatic **Ambience Minimus** (1994): memorable melodies slowed down, came to a standstill and decomposed in celestial chimes, echoes of angels and breathing of nebulae. The neo-classical **Unity** (2000), instead, let strings and woodwinds float, multiply and merge as if an entire repertory of "adagios" was being played in slow motion and out of sync by an orchestra of orchestras.

In a lighter mood, [Richard Bone](#) (2) was equally at ease with the surreal synth-pop of **Vox Orbita** (1995) and the ambient symphony of **Eternal Now** (1996).

Dutch duo [Beequeen](#) (Frans De Waard and Freek Kinkelaar) dabbled in droning compositions inspired by ambient, cosmic and industrial music, notably on their most austere recordings, such as **Music For The Head Ballet** (1996) and **Treatise** (2000).

Electronic Ambient World Music, 1988-94

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By exploiting Steve Roach's ideas, a number of musicians scoured the territory at the border between new-age music, ambient music and world-music.

San Francisco's "modern primitivism" movement was best represented by a multi-national commune that emerged with the music of [Lights In A Fat City](#) (1), centered upon Canadian electronic composer Kenneth Newby, British-born didjeridoo player Stephen Kent and percussionist Eddy Sayer. **Somewhere** (1988) was possibly the first electronic album built around the sound of the didjeridoo, and juxtaposed hypnotic rhythms to a madly droning background. **Sound Column** (1993) was a more philosophical work, comprising four improvisations for didjeridoo and acoustic instruments recorded inside a huge pillar. That project evolved into [Trance Mission](#) (12), formed by Newby and Kent with Club Foot Orchestra's clarinetist Beth Custer and percussionist John Loose. **Trance Mission** (1993), a dense maelstrom of jazz improvisation, transcendental exotica, atmospheric electronica and tribal rhythms, took a new route to Brian

Eno's ambient trance and to Jon Hassell's fourth-world music. That wedding of futuristic and ancestral elements was abandoned on **Meanwhile** (1995), for a more facile dance-exotic fusion that evoked the vision of the Third Ear Band mixed by a techno producer; while later works such as **Head Light** (1997) veered towards an alien form of free-jazz. Kent and harpist Barbara Imhoff (accompanied by a percussionist and a vocalist) explored a simpler kind of electronic folk music under the moniker [Beasts Of Paradise](#) on **Gathered On The Edge** (1995).

[Kenneth Newby](#) (10), a member of the Trance Mission collective, crafted **Ecology Of Souls** (1993), perhaps the most accomplished fusion of electronic music and exotic instruments of the era. Four lengthy suites explored a magical, surreal, mythological landscape roamed by rhythmic patterns and primordial sounds, swept by intergalactic winds and tidal waves of cosmic radiations, while melodramatic and ethereal moments alternated at creating a metaphysical suspense.

Germany's [Enigma](#) (2), the project of Romanian-born veteran disco producer and electronic composer Michael Cretu (aka Curly M.C.), elaborated a pseudo-ethnic ambient style that would be very influential on mainstream music. **MCMXC A.D.** (1990) mixed Gregorian chanting, dance beats, new-age ecstasy and exotic fascination. **The Cross Of Changes** (1994) was a tour de force of juxtapositions and layering that roamed the world for inspiration (French chansons, African polyrhythms, Middle-eastern cantillation, Peruvian flutes, operatic choirs, etc).

France's [Deep Forest](#) (1) were successful on **Deep Forest** (1992) with a similar idea: an atmospheric potion of ethnic samples and dance beats.

[Mo Boma](#) (12), the duo of German multi-instrumentalist Carsten Tiedemann and Iceland-born jazz bassist Skuli Sverrisson, achieved a brilliant fusion of Brian Eno, Jon Hassell, Klaus Schulze, Weather Report and Pat Metheny, for the age of raves on **Jjimuge** (1992) and especially on the more electronic, primitive-futurist **Myths Of The Near Future** (1994). The first part of a trilogy recorded in South Africa in 1993, the latter set the foundations for the sophisticated ethno-jazz of **Myths Of The Near Future Part Two** (released in 1995) and the lush, symphonic "thickness" of **Myths Of The Near Future Part Three** (1996). Overall, the trilogy represented a majestic celebration of the human race.

Australia's [Eden](#) (11), the brainchild of vocalist Sean Bowley, displayed the combined influence of Dead Can Dance's exotic/medieval music and Nico's ancestral folk on the madrigals of **Gateway To The Mysteries** (1990), performed by a chamber ensemble (rich in ancient instruments) and sung in lugubrious ecclesiastical tones. The macabre and decadent ballads of **Fire And Rain** (1995) added Paul Machliss' electronic arrangements.

Veteran British guitarist [Mike Cooper](#), who had played blues in the 1960s and jazz in the 1970s, coined "ambient electronic exotica" (reminiscent of Jon Hassell's "fourth-world music") for guitar, electronics, samples of old records, and field recordings from exotic countries on albums such as **Kiribati** (1999), **Globe Notes** (2001) and **Rayon Hula** (2004).

Transglobal trance, 1992-94

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It was not avantgarde, but Britain's "transglobal dance" was a natural consequence of the merger of electronica and world-music in the age of raves.

[TUU](#) (2), mainly Martin Franklin's project, delivered arcane, sacred and ethnic trance on **One Thousand Years** (1992), evoking both Third Ear Band and Popol Vuh. **All Our Ancestors** (1995) approached chamber music and Jon Hassell's fourth-world music, while the more electronic **Mesh** (1997) was influenced by Steve Roach's sinister soundscapes.

[Voices Of Kwahn](#) offered an elegant fusion of quirky vocals and electronic/ethnic ambience on their second album **Silver Bowl Transmission** (1996).

Guitar drones

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An important thread for ambient music was started in Britain when the post-shoegazing psychedelic groups began playing music anchored to guitar drones. [Seefeel](#) (2) pioneered the idea on **Quique** (1993) and **Succour** (1994). The combination of Sarah Peacock's stunned vocals, Mark Clifford's minimalist guitars, Justin Fletcher's proto-rhythms and Darren Seymour's dub bass lines dissolved the music of My Bloody Valentine and Spacemen 3 in nebulae of abstract sound.

Drone-based symphonies became the bread and butter of most shoegazing veterans.

Spacemen 3's guitarist Sonic Boom (Peter Kember) began a stubborn quest for the mystical qualities of sound. His first success was with **Soul Kiss** (1991), the second, ultra-ethereal album by [Spectrum](#) (1). Kember's second success came with [Experimental Audio Research](#) (2), or E.A.R., the experimental trio formed with God's Kevin Martin and My Bloody Valentine's Kevin Shields, who produced at least two innovative recordings: the four cosmic-ambient suites of **Mesmerised** (1994) and the three futuristic concertos of **Millennium Music** (1998).

[Main](#) (2), the new project of Loop's Robert Hampson, was an obsessive probe into the power of drones. Over the course of a number of EPs, **Hydra** (1991), **Calm** (1992), **Dry Stone Feed** (1993) and **Firmament** (1993), and the album **Motion Pool** (1994), Hampson's style evolved from a dark, cold, dynamic sound to a softer, static, almost mystical sound. The two colossal tracks of **Firmament II** (1994) and the six multi-part suites of **Hz** (1996) coined a sophisticated art of nuances that, far from being only cacophonous and monotonous, was rich in the way that a black hole is rich of invisible gravitational energy. Hampson's technique was perhaps the closest a rock musician had come to repeating Karlheinz Stockhausen's experiments of the 1960s.

Sound manipulation of acoustic sources became the focus of many artists of this generation.

[Rapoon](#) (3), the brainchild of Zoviet France's Robin Storey, gave new meaning to the fusion of Indian and western music on albums such as **Vernal Crossing** (1993) and **The Kirghiz Light** (1995), exalted orgies of samples, loops and mixing that "used" drones and rhythms rather than "playing" drones and rhythms. He then converted to the mystical/contemplative style of **Darker By Light** (1996), **Easterly 6 Or 7** (1997) and **The Fires Of The Borderlands** (1998), that basically reconciled his experiments with new-age music.

[O.Rang](#) (1), the new project of Talk Talk's rhythm section of Lee Harris (percussions) and Paul Webb (now on keyboards), manipulated the sounds of a small orchestra of friends on **Herd Of Instinct** (1994).

[Flying Saucer Attack](#) (2), i.e. the duo of multi-instrumentalists Dave Pearce and Rachel Brook, were among the groups that transformed psychedelic rock into an austere form of chamber music. The albums **Flying Saucer Attack** (1993), **Further** (1995) and **New Lands** (1997) refined a kind of shoegazing that relied increasingly on melody, yielding delicate elegies set against a disturbing background of cosmic music, free-jazz, Throbbing Gristle's industrial noise, LaMonte Young's droning music or contemplative new-age music.

German guitar trio [Maeror Tri](#) (1) co-pioneered doomsday's music for guitar-drones, although their white-noise hurricanes, particularly on the monumental **Myein** (1995), recorded in 1992 and 1993, were reminiscent of both Glenn Branca's symphonies and Throbbing Gristle's industrial nightmares.

Ambient avantgarde, 1989-94

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At the turn of the century, ambient composers abounded all over the world.

Veteran British music critic [David Toop](#) (2) aimed for Brian Eno's ambient ecstasy via a mix of natural sounds, electronic sounds and acoustic instruments on **Buried Dreams** (1994), a collaboration with Max Eastley, basically reinventing musique concrete for the ambient generation. **Screen Ceremonies** (1995) was the austere manifesto of this fusion of ethnic and concrete music. Toop used real buildings as well as imaginary buildings as sources of inspiration, conceiving them as sentient organisms, notably for the 26-minute eco-suite *Smell of Human Life*, off **Museum Of Fruit** (1999).

Belgian composer [Benjamin Lew](#) (1) crafted **Le Parfum Du Raki** (1993) for an ensemble of electronic, ethnic and acoustic instruments.

[Alio Die](#) (2), the project of Italian composer Stefano Musso, assembled electronic pieces such as **Sit Tibi Terra Levis** (1991) that continued Harold Budd's program of angelic music. In **Suspended Feathers** (1995)

tiny instances of natural sounds appear in calm soft soundscapes and create disorienting shifting perspectives, the sonic equivalent of a camera that slowly moves around the landscape. The drone symphony **Password for Entheogenic Experience** (1997) evolves in time instead of space, as the initial pastoral setting gets stretched and dilated into a dreamy mournful adagio and then modulated into the geometry of a baroque fugue and then channeled into the austere macabre grandeur of a requiem.

British audio-visual technician Andrew Lagowski launched both the dark ambient project of [Legion](#), that released **False Dawn** (1992) for found sounds and white noise, and especially **Leviathan** (1996), a six-movement symphony of exoteric electronica, and the project [SETI](#), at the border between techno, ambient and dub.

German electronic musician [Pete Namlook](#) (Peter Kuhlmann), one of the most prolific musicians of all times (not a compliment), focused on the untapped potential of analog synthesizers, often developing or extending the instruments in his own laboratory. Most of his 200+ recordings were collaborations with influential artists of his time, and many were repeated collaborations (i.e., with sequels): **Silence** (1992) with Dr Atmo, **The Dark Side Of The Moog** (1994) with Klaus Schulze, **Psychonavigation** (1994) with Bill Laswell, **Jet Chamber** (1995) with Atom Heart, etc. Namlook's own music, the series that started with **Air** (1993), endorsed one or a combination of the following: German "kosmische musik", Brian Eno's "discreet" music, free-jazz and/or Eastern classical music.

After familiarizing himself with the soft, slowly-decaying gong drones of **Teimo** (1992), German composer [Thomas Koner](#) (1) penned the drone-based ambient music of **Permafrost** (1993). These pieces laid the foundations for hour-long compositions such as *Daikan* (2001), the zenith of his icy ambience, and *Une Topographie Sonore* (2003), that obsessively explores a magical and ethereal soundscape of natural sounds and eerie drones.

Australian composer [Paul Schutze](#) (15) was inspired by Brian Eno's ambient music, Miles Davis' jazz-rock and Pierre Henry's musique concrete for the one-hour collage of **Deus Ex Machina** (1989) and for the claustrophobic *Topology Of A Phantom City*, off **New Maps Of Hell** (1992), perhaps the best formulation of his "chaotic minimalism", a psychological puzzle of dissonance, trance, jazz, psychedelia, tribal frenzy, raga and ambient melodrama. The same urban neurosis tore **The Rapture Of Metals** (1993) apart, and disfigured **Apart** (1995), an imposing summary of his techniques, particularly the cryptic and sinister suite *Sleep*. **Nine Songs From The Garden Of Welcome Lies** (1997) employed organs instead of synthesizers to improvise soundscapes halfway between Monet's abstract impressionism and Tibetan mantras.

Indiana-based ambient guitarist [Jeff Pearce](#) employed layers and layers of electronically-processed guitar melodies to compose **The Hidden Rift** (1996).

New York-based pianist [Ruben Garcia](#) (1) opted for a more emotional version of Harold Budd's ambient piano minimalism in *Eleven Moons*, off **Room Full of Easels** (1996).

Alaska resident [John Luther Adams](#) composed static music in the minimalist tradition but scored for chamber orchestras. Thus his colossal *In The White Silence* (1998), *The Light That Fills the World* (2000) and *The Immeasurable Space of Tones* (2001) for violin, vibraphone, piano, keyboard and contrabass.

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